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IS ALCOHOL TROUBLING YOU?

BY AN ALCOHOLIC

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Is Alcohol Troubling You?

IF my nom-de plume on this article is that of "An Alcoholic" it signifies my conviction that there is no such thing as an ex-alcoholic. On that point, as on a number of others, I am in complete agreement with Alcoholics Anonymous. No man, (or woman) once alcohol has secured a dangerous grip on him, will ever, as long as he lives, be safe in saying that he was *once* an alcoholic. For the rest of his life, the threat of alcoholism will stand at his elbow.

This article is written in the hope that it may be of some help to men and women who are troubled by the progressive danger of alcoholism. I believe that I may have some helpful things to say, and that I can show them some guide posts, particularly in the Church, of which they may not have been aware. You see, I know what I am talking about. I am an alcoholic, too.

It all seems pretty hopeless sometimes, doesn't it?

It's especially discouraging for the periodic drinker, with his few weeks in between, and then the plunge of four or five days or more, until, from sheer weariness, he is able to do no more. I know. It must be discouraging for the faithful priest who tries so earnestly to help—for the man's wife, with her hope that this time may be the last, that this time her words of encouragement and confidence will win out.

Are You One?

In the first place, let's see if you're an alcoholic—if you've reached the danger point. There is no exact measuring stick, yet, from my own experience, I'd say that there are several fairly reliable signs. First, of course, is that "hair of the dog" business. If you make a night of it, get up with a forty-foot hangover and it doesn't occur to you to cure it, first thing next morning, with more of same, then you're not yet past the "stop" sign, provided those big nights don't occur too regularly. But if the first thought you have next morning is of getting a double hooker for a bracer, another at ten-thirty, two more at noon—you're an alcoholic. That sort of thing moves fast and steadily downwards. If the day after a party, the day of the hangover, is always worse

ing all that money on yourself, just for drink? Find out, sometime, what half that sum could have done for missions.

Let me make one thing clear, I'm not a Dry, have no sympathy whatever with their blind insistence that prohibition is strictly a moral issue. Sometimes they seem to believe that it is the major moral issue and that all others are relatively unimportant. I'm in favor of people being able to have their drink. I don't feel that the alcoholic is primarily a moral problem; I think he's an ill man, who needs to have his thinking reoriented, his vision cleared and re-directed, and to be taught to use the many aids at his disposal. One cannot successfully legislate in matters like temperance. People can, and will use or abuse anything. Alcohol can be used, and it can be abused; so can tobacco and coffee. We alcoholics, however, can't use alcohol; we only abuse it.

Now — What to Do

First and most important, *never give up*. You may feel as I often have, that seventy times seven is too often for a man to expect forgiveness, that it is unfair to turn to a merciful God and ask His pardon

and help once more. That's wrong thinking. A priest, now deceased, of Trinity Church in New York, once made me see that the Church is a hospital for sinners rather than a club for saints, and that as a hospital, it is there to *help*. I don't care how many times you've been down, how bad it was this last time, force yourself back into God's presence, get on your knees before the Blessed Sacrament and just once more say "Lord, be merciful to me, a sinner." Say the 51st Psalm. Then just kneel there for a while and don't try to think. The blessed Holy Spirit will take over then. Help will come.

I do not for one minute mean to imply that it makes no difference how often a man falls, provided only that he is ultimately penitent and tries again. Of course it makes a difference. Every time you go down you weaken the little spark of fight left in you. Our sin is one of will, rather than one of understanding, for most of us alcoholics know exactly what our trouble is. What we lack is the will to say "NO!" But let me repeat once more—*never give up*. One of these days you'll stand and look back on those awful days and nights and wonder if that could really have been you. And when you do, don't feel too confident,

for your old besetting sin is just behind you, right where it will always be. I've seen men start again, from over-confidence, after having stopped for two years. Then there is the old fight all over.

Now — The Priest

I say to the priest, as well as to the alcoholic, "never give up." I know how discouraging it is for our priests whose parishioners are alcoholics. Prayers, pledges and pleadings all seem so futile sometimes. One day, by God's grace, those prayers will be answered. Keep your alcoholic in your prayers, for "the effectual, fervent prayer of a righteous man availeth much". Not only that, if your alcoholic knows that your prayers constantly follow him, it will work deep into his subconscious mind as a restraining influence.

And to the priest I want to add a few more observations. First, get that man's confession out of him, but then don't let him get started feeling sorry for himself. Get his thinking going along optimistic and constructive lines. Let him see that by the mercy of God, other men—myself included—have put this thing behind them. If Alcoholics Anonymous can help you, familiarize yourself with this wonder-

ful organization; give them a place to meet in your parish house, if you can, for some of the clergy have done that, with splendid results. Give your alcoholic a job to do in the church; chances are, he'll do it well, and the proximity to and activity in the church will be good for him. Almost any physician or jurist can tell you where the nearest AA group is located. Get acquainted with them; you'll find some fine men in there. I've never been a member, but I know what they have done. Their methods are sound and their results are amazing. Psychiatrists, clergy and physicians come to AA headquarters to find out how it's done, for the AA results have been little short of miraculous in many cases. They are not a religious organization, but among their requirements is that a man seeking their aid, Catholic, Jew or Protestant, must reconcile himself with his God. The AA's do no evangelical work; they do not seek out the alcoholic; only when he admits he's licked and asks their help do they go into action.

I'd like both priest and alcoholic to consider one of the greatest helps I had. A priest who knew my trouble, and to whom I had been especially close, induced me to write him a monthly report on how

I'd done. It wasn't a confession; it was just to be an honest report of progress or failure. If I went down, I said so. If I stayed up, and didn't go down so often, (which, for a long time, was very rare) I felt almost like wiring him. Immediately after every report, back came a note from him, encouraging me, urging me forward, sorry if I'd failed, always and everlastingly confident in my eventual victory, provided I sought God's mighty aid. I knew that that priest was in there pitching for me. I hated the thought of disappointing him, for I felt that his Master would feel just as that good servant of His did. I failed many times after that "report" system started, but the failures became fewer and fewer, and periods in between were longer and longer. That priest gave me a sense of the nearness of God, so that I felt that I could turn to Him at any time, with even the shortest of prayers. Through the mercy of God, and with the help of that priest, my personal devil has been shoved into the background. True, he's still there every minute, but I have other more absorbing interests now.

It is a tough battle—and a discouraging one, and in it God is your most powerful ally. A priest once

told me that God's power is like the dynamo back of an electric light switch. The Power is there, day and night, but if we are to have light, then we must make the effort of reaching for the switch. Then the light comes on. That much effort, however, we *must* make.

Right there the alcoholic has one of his crucial moments, (I've walked around the block to avoid my old saloon, too). When that urge comes on, and only another alcoholic can know how terrific it can be, try some quick ejaculatory prayer—"Jesus, help me"—or merely call on His Holy Name. That, you see, is reaching for the switch. The Power is there. Try it. You could be pleasantly surprised.

Meet Euphoria

And now a big danger point, and that is what the psychiatrists call "euphoria". (I had to look it up, too!) It means a sense of well being. Better develop a lasting mistrust of that gal Euphoria, because she's one of your worst and most deceptive enemies. Every alcoholic is repentant and humble when he's shaking his way out of a bender, and it usually lasts a week or so. Then, feeling better, the memory of the last binge isn't so painful. You forget the money you

spent, the disgraceful things you did and said, the hurt you caused, the promises you made, and broke. You feel better, much better; funny, how badly you felt a week or so ago, feel fine now. 'Watch out, my friend—that gal Euphoria is tailing you'. I'm serious. Here, right here, is one of your worst danger points. Euphoria whispers to you "O, go ahead! A couple won't hurt at all, you can handle them, and then, of course, you'll stop and go home. Take some cloves or lemon peel and your wife won't know. You're all right now, two can't possibly hurt you, and look how tired you are, and signs of a cold coming on, too. A couple would really not be a drink, just medicinal. Go to it, it can't hurt a thing."

Suppose you follow Euphoria's advice, and take those two. Three days later you may try to get your first real night's sleep and fail because your nerves are too jumpy, your heart palpitates too much. If there's one man in this world Euphoria will always double cross, it's an alcoholic. I know the wench well, to my sorrow. Watch out for her, boot her out, and keep your guard up. We alcoholics don't ever fool anyone but ourselves, and yet we are always so sure that we get by with it.

Your Life-Long Motto

And now another thing of first importance. Your motto from here on out must be *absolute abstinence.* That means just exactly what it says, and there are, as you know very well, sound reasons for it. You're not one who can handle a drink, for with you, one drink may mean fifty, probably will. Why not admit it? You can't have a beer, or a glass of wine, just to be a good fellow; you can't have anything with alcohol in it. I know and have used all the excuses you ever thought up, and none of them mean a thing. You take just one, to be sociable, or because your host is your biggest advertising account. Next day, confident that you handled that one successfully, and with Euphoria "on the make", you joyfully swing into another, and another and another, and then you quit counting because you no longer care about counting, you don't care about anything except that you're not worrying about anything at all—and come slowly out of it five days later. Believe me, friend, I know. I've done it.

Why not be honest about it? I've not lost a real friend since I stopped, and in most cases I'm entirely frank about why I don't drink. I find men

respect me for it, and many secretly envy me. I just can't handle it—period. In addition to their respect, I've regained my own.

Other Helps

I know what you're up against. Thomas à Kempis, in "The Imitation of Christ" wrote " Whoso hath a greater combat than he that laboreth to overcome himself?" I wish you'd get that book. And be sure to get the Catholic edition, which does not omit the glorious chapter on Holy Communion. Get the habit of meditation, of ten minutes a day with God. Read the little "Forward" booklet daily. You haven't time? That's what I thought. Sure you have time. On the train, at lunch time, on the way home, just after or before breakfast. That daily meditation will clear your mind, will give you new insight into the Truth of our Blessed Lord. And when you read, *think*.

Have you made a retreat at some religious house? Your priest can tell you where the nearest one is, and if you can go, I think you will find it the best weekend you ever spent, one that you will repeat at regular intervals for the rest of your life. "Quiet days" at your parish church are fine, of course, but

you and I need to get clear away and in solitude and silence to rid ourselves of our trouble and begin again with our full reserves of spiritual strength restored. Do try it.

I sat, not long ago, in a church where, before the Altar, lay a casket containing the body of a comparatively young man who had died suddenly. You and I have had many and many a chance. How very merciful God has been to us, hasn't He? And here, now, we have, by His grace, one more. Do we dare miss this one? That man before the Altar had no thought of dying. Once we have left this life, our last chance is gone, our chance to try again forever ended. We've had our chance. Are you so sure you will have another?

No one knows better than I what a fight you have on your hands. But again I say to you, *never give up*. Try once more, however discouraged you may be, however hopeless and long the failures have been. It can be done, if only you will reach for the switch; the Light will come on, for the Power is always there.

Use your Church; use its sacraments of Penance,

of Holy Communion. Make your confession and start again; keep your mind often with God in meditation however short and impromptu. You have no safer refuge. Be certain that God will help you again, and again, and again. "And when a man shall have done what lieth in him and shall be truly penitent, how often so ever he shall come to Me for pardon and for grace,—as I live, saith the Lord, who will not the death of a sinner, but rather that he be converted and live, I will not remember his sins any more, but they shall all be forgiven him." That's Thomas à Kempis in "The Imitation" again. Few men knew their Lord and understood their fellow man better.

In its work as a hospital for sinners, which includes alcoholics, our Church today is doing some thoroughly modern and highly effective thinking and therapy. Many of our leading clergy are vitally and actively interested in this problem of ours, eager to help, seeking the very best means of helping. Go to your priest and ask his aid, for you cannot win by yourself. If you feel Alcoholics Anonymous can help you, by all means go to them. You need feel no shame there, for you will meet many

very fine men and women among them. I am convinced that God and Alcoholics Anonymous are working together. Many of our priests seem to feel the same way.

Remember your morning and evening prayers; make your Communion regularly—don't stay away, as so many of us do because we feel too unworthy to come. That's just pride. When He said "Come unto Me all ye that travail and are heavy laden" He didn't exclude us. In fact, He sought us to come in direct proportion to the measure of our need—and your need and mine is very great.

And some day, my friend, when you have overcome this, *as you can and will*, say with me—

"Praise the Lord, O my soul, and all that is within me, praise His Holy Name.

"Praise the Lord, O my soul, and forget not all His benefits;

"Who forgiveth all thy sin, and healeth all thine infirmities;

"Who saveth thy life from destruction, and crowneth thee with mercy and loving kindness. . . ."

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